As the strict functionality of travel began to cease, the 19th century saw the rise of travel for pleasure and acquisition of packaged knowledge. Exotic tours to remote parts of the world and the desire to be among the first to explore other cultures in a short space of time make the presence of a learned and compelling guide a necessity. Bruce Wannell, an expert lecturer and guide on tours of the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa, explains what kindled his love of travel.

TRAVEL starts young and stays in the blood: in my case, my parents’ travel from war-shattered Europe to Australia, where I was born, only to return for schooling in England. Boomerangs and illustrated stories about exotic fauna would arrive through the post from godparents ‘down-under’. Over the kitchen of my childhood presided a dark wooden statue brought back by my grandfather from the Belgian campaigns in the Luba area of the Congo in the First World War; we called it ‘le Roi Negre’ until a visitor pointed out that it was a ‘Reine Negre’ with a prominent umbilical cord. My paternal aunt came back from Kenya with stories of waving and smiling aer way through crowds of potentially hostile Mau-Mau peasantry, who returned cheerful welcoming greetings. A colleague of my parents showed us slides of her recent trips to the Middle East where breads as big as carpets were hung up for sale: she told us of being held up in the mountains by bandits who melted away when the British ladies started swearing like troopers. Teachers at the military boarding school – which my father hoped would train his three sons for careers in the army – occasionally told of their experiences in Japanese prisoner of war camps, Burmese intelligence operations near the Chinese border, mapping Assassin castles in Iran or tracing human trafficking.

The 1976 ‘World of Islam’ festival in London opened my eyes after university to the splendours of Islamic art, after I had been studying the German poet Goethe’s Persian-inspired ‘West-Ostlicher Divan’ and had met Iranian musicians through the Berlin Institut fuer Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft. A fragment of Catullus – ‘ad clarum asiae volemus urbes’ – drew me on, and a chance meeting with a Bahá’í lecturer from Iran landed me with a university job in Isfahan just as the revolution broke out in 1978. The chance contact promptly fled the persecution of his religious group, considered heretical, while the number of foreigners employed diminished to zero, as strikes closed the university – for ideological re-upholstering, I briefly taught for the British Council until that, too, was closed. My students taught me Persian, perhaps more effectively than I taught them English or French, and I might have stayed on, renewing my visa every three months by crossing over into Afghanistan in spite of the Russian invasion, but the visa police, kindly but firmly, suggested that it would be better not to overstay my welcome.

The expeditions to go mountain-climbing in Shir Kuh or above Natanz, or to go boar-hunting in the Zagros above Shahr-e Kord were becoming more and more difficult, so I reluctantly agreed to leave, and did not return for almost two decades to Iran.

My return, after a six-month walk around the southern and eastern Mediterranean to learn Arabic, after almost eight years’ work with Afghan refugees, was due, in part, to a friendship I had struck up with a remarkable Iranian neurosurgeon who was completing his studies in Islamabad. He was collecting mystical commentaries on the tradition of the Imam Ali regarding the nature of spiritual truth and asked me to translate his Arabic and Persian collection into English. After a three-year meander along the east coast of Africa and the Yemen, Ethiopia and the Sudan and Egypt, I came home and moved to the wide-open skies and big landscapes of Yorkshire, and decided to fund my rewarding but unpaid study of Iranian Islamic mysticism by guest-lecturing on cultural tours to countries that I had known and liked. A not-always-easy apprenticeship, but satisfying when guests become friends and share sympathy and enthusiasm for the cultures and people visited.

Bruce Wannell’s forthcoming tours for Eastern Approaches will be to Tunisia, Nabatea, the Deccan and the Swahili Coast, and for Distant Horizons to Uzbekistan and Iran.